

## **Composition Portfolio**

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## Portfolio Introduction

Enrolling in master's was a natural progression for me as a composer. This follows directly on from my other tertiary study: First Class Honours Degree in Composition from University of Canterbury; Diploma in Jazz from CPIT Jazz School majoring in Composition and Arranging.

During my career I have received several grants from Creative New Zealand including grants in 2008 and 2013 for *Still Standing Silent* a work composed for mixed discipline ensemble (classical and jazz) and contemporary dancers. This work premiered in Christchurch in November 2009. In 2010, I received funding to work with well-known Sydney chamber ensemble The Song Company utilizing a text by a fellow Dutch New Zealander, Riemke Ensing.

My body of work also includes compositions for the Silencio Ensemble, a ten piece new-music ensemble, which I was the co-founder and musical director/conductor of ('05-'09), and a number of works for community and school choirs.

Recent creative projects have included performances of *Still Standing Silent* for the Body Festival; commissions for The Christchurch Youth Orchestra and the Risingholme Orchestra; *Totally Weill* for the Christchurch Arts Festival; and several arrangements of New Zealand popular music for the Christchurch Symphony Orchestra. I have also continued to work in an improvisatory method with other musicians and dancers as part of the organisation Movement Art Practice.

During my master's year I have continued to develop my specific aesthetic of jazz-like timbres and freely-atonal harmonies. While it is often a point of comment from listeners and musical colleagues that my music seems to span the musical styles of jazz and contemporary classical music, I think it is worth noting that these elements are not contrived or consciously fashioned. Rather I find it is a very natural and innate way of creating sounds.

In *Storm Warning* I made a clear choice to write for a jazz styled voice and explore timbres that are evident in the world of jazz while working in a chamber setting. The range and rhythm of the melodies were rich with jazz style nuances and while the harmony was primarily atonal there were moments of consonance.

In *Declare Gently* I employed brass and woodwind chords that had jazz like voicings but would not be considered jazz chords. The brass section of the orchestra takes a dominant role in the piece which is redolent of a big band ensemble. Some of the melodies also had modern-jazz like elements.

In recent years, I have realised how in my work I have often been dealing with the effects of time on music. I often juxtapose freedom and structure, starkness with flowing sounds in an attempt to break free from the constraints of time.

The work which most heavily explores this concept is *Declare Gently*. As I outline in the programme notes for this piece, I have had my own classification for time in music for a number of years: eternal and man-made time. This work is intended to be eternal, without beginning or end, a moment that the audience have stumbled across in the constraints of their own time.

In *Storm Warning* time is explored in various places in the text, which was part of the appeal this collection of poems held for me. In setting this text, it allowed me to play with and against the aspects of time the poet explored. In *Three Mists for Piano* I explored both very metronomic time with moments of introduction or suspense, as well as the distending of time. These pieces are, in their very nature, fleeting and ephemeral.

Another feature of my work is that I have enjoyed collaborating with specific musicians and composition-specific ensembles. The first work of my master's portfolio, *Violin Duo*, was a commission for two musicians with specific objectives. *Storm Warning* was a handpicked ensemble of musicians with whom I have either worked with on previous projects or whose musical style and technical abilities I was very familiar with. Working in this way creates exciting sonic possibilities that are not always present when composing for a set ensemble style. The five musicians who performed this work are also very open minded musicians who like to explore the outer realms of their musical and technical capabilities. This was an incredible palate to create a work from. I feel the work is very unique and captivating as a result.

Recently I have had the opportunity to explore working with text and as a result have developed a special and unique relationship with poet Riemke Ensing. It was a pleasure and an honour to work with her text again this year on the major work of my portfolio, *Storm Warning*. Setting text creates specific challenges and parameters within which to work. Conversely it also allows for much freedom of expression and richness in delivery. It was a great joy to me that this work was premiered in the Writer's Festival in Christchurch and that Riemke was able to attend the performance.

My core reason for being a composer is the hope or belief that music can raise the consciousness of humanity to a higher plain. In recent years I have begun to doubt this and question the point of 'being' a composer as distinct from 'working' as a composer. How do I, working with the medium of sound, create meaningful statements regarding my world views in a way that can attempt achieve this incredibly lofty ideal?

As a result of this type of thinking I composed *Exponential Fanfare*. This is the first time I have written what could loosely be termed a 'political' piece, in that the message is concrete and based on statistical measures of an area of New Zealand politics that I feel strongly about, our rising foreign debt. This was an exploration of how 'being' a composer could continue to be relevant and meaningful to me.

Conversely, working towards deadlines, academic requirements, and within the confines of a musical community that has been almost decimated in recent years forced me to be a 'working' composer. Managing a teaching load, finding performers in a city with very few working ensembles, and continuing to generate and develop ideas was a challenge.

I have come to the realisation that my questions around being a composer or working as a composer are not competing ideals; rather they are the flip side of the same coin. The freedom and framework of the master's programme has allowed me to have this experience and it has been a satisfying and rewarding year in my musical development.

*Alex van den Broek (2015) [www.alexvdbroek.co.nz](http://www.alexvdbroek.co.nz)*

## **Notes on Exponential Fanfare - Observe the Trends I \***

The genesis of this piece was a graph I discovered depicting New Zealand's rising foreign debt. I found the statistics frightening and my initial musical idea was to create a 'musical map' of these statistics.

I had planned to only use the sound of a recorded trumpet playing a single held note as my musical material. However, after several attempts I wasn't achieving musical results that pleased me. The sounds didn't represent the emotion I was trying to portray; a feeling of being strangled or trapped in some way.

The resulting piece maintains the limitation of the recorded trumpet but doesn't attempt to represent the graph in a literal way. Rather I used the source material of the recorded trumpet and manipulated it, creating a structure and sound world that communicated the idea and sentiment in a way that I found pleasing. I decided to only alter certain parameters to portray the feeling of the choke-hold that foreign debt has on the New Zealand economy and public. To that end I experimented with alterations of pitch and volume and used reverb to make the sound powerful and more regal.

*\*Notes for this piece are included in this booklet as this work does not have a score. All other notes are included with the scores of the works they refer to.*

## CD Contents

### 1. Declare Gently

- Christchurch Symphony Orchestra\*

CSO Rehearsal room 17.10.2014

*\*This recording was a read through only. The orchestra spent 15 minutes with this score after a scheduled rehearsal for a concert in their 2014 season.*

### 2. Exponential Fanfare – Observe the Trends 1

### 3. Storm Warning

- Voice – Naomi Ferguson
- Oboe & Cor Anglais – Jenny Johnson
- Clarinet and Bass Clarinet – Gretchen La Roche
- Trombone – Scott Taitoko
- Percussion – Mark La Roche

Linwood Community Arts Centre, Word Christchurch Festival 29.08.2014

### 4. Storm Warning for Piano and Voice

- Voice – Naomi Ferguson
- Piano – Alex van den Broek

Canterbury University School of Music, Platform Arts Festival, 'Sculptural Sounds' 16.09.2014

### 5. Three Mists for Piano

- Piano – Alex van den Broek

Canterbury University School of Music 19.02.2015

### 6. Violin Duo

- Cathy Irons – Violin
- Joanna Dramatis – Violin

Canterbury University School of Music, Platform Arts Festival, 'Across the Water' 11.09.2014

## **DVD Contents**

### **1. Violin Duo**

Canterbury University School of Music, Platform Arts Festival, 'Across the Water' 11.09.2014

### **2. Storm Warning**

Linwood Community Arts Centre, Word Christchurch Festival 29.08.2014

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